

How Jerry Brown Can Seal His Legacy as a Climate Champion

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Body

SAN FRANCISCO — This is a message, and a plea, for Gov. Jerry Brown of California.

Please sign the bill.

This is also a message for his constituents. If you care about moving the world onto a hopeful path on climate change, Governor Brown needs to hear from you. The message he needs to hear is: For the sake of our children's future and your own legacy as a climate champion, please sign the bill.

The measure, known as Senate Bill 100, passed the California Legislature last week. It commits the state to a 100 percent clean electricity grid by 2045. Rumors are swirling in Sacramento that the governor might veto that bill. His office has not said what he will do, which is ominous.

This bill could well be the most important piece of climate legislation ever passed by any government. Putting the nation's largest state on a path to a clean electric grid would send an unmistakable signal to the rest of world that the odious Trump administration is not going to stop climate progress in the United States. It would encourage other states and countries to follow California's lead.

It is true that Hawaii already passed a 100 percent commitment, three years ago, but the California economy is 30 times larger than Hawaii's. If the electric grid can be cleaned up in California, it can be cleaned up anywhere.

Putting this measure on the books would also indicate that the world's governments may yet muster the political courage to do what must be done to head off catastrophic climate damage: cut greenhouse emissions to zero by the middle of this century. China has been carefully watching, and sometimes emulating, California climate policy.

Governor Brown has been one of the world's most important voices on climate action. So why would he conceivably want to veto this bill?

Alas, nothing is ever simple in Sacramento. The author of the bill was Kevin de León, a state senator from Los Angeles who has long butted heads with Governor Brown. Mr. de León is running this fall against Senator Dianne Feinstein, a longtime Brown ally (the two, both Democrats, were the top finishers in a nonpartisan primary in June). Vetoing the bill would have the effect, if not the intent, of denying Mr. de León a big victory on which to run.

The bigger issue, though, is that the governor had his own priorities in the legislative session that just ended. He wanted lawmakers to pass a bill that would have linked California's electric grid more closely to that of other Western states. That would have made it easier for California to import clean electricity from, say, wind farms in Wyoming, and to export the state's surplus of solar power.

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Senator de León fought to keep the issues separate, and he won. The legislature declined to act on the governor's requests, though it is expected to revisit the issue next year, after he leaves office.

So it is understandable that the governor is perturbed. I thought he had a good argument about expanding the grid, but some environmental groups feared that bill would open the door to mischief, allowing the fossil-fuel puppets in the Trump administration to force California to take more dirty coal power. This is not a crazy fear, since the federal government has some jurisdiction over interstate power sales.

The sausage-making played out as it did, and now we have what the governor likely sees as an uncooked sausage sitting on his desk. Yet to veto the legislation that passed would be a black mark on his remarkable record of climate leadership.

The bill is clever. It commits California to procuring more renewable energy from wind and solar farms, which will have to supply 60 percent of the state's power by 2030. But the bill recognizes that other sources of clean energy will likely be needed to drive emissions to zero.

So for the remaining 40 percent, the bill allows any low-emissions source to compete. California will, I hope, set up a robust market in which new types of power plants can win a share, so long as they offer a reasonable price. The potential options include advanced nuclear reactors, geothermal plants tapping the earth's interior heat, floating offshore wind turbines, and gas-burning power plants that capture and bury their emissions.

In other words, California could well be the place where the electric grid of the future gets invented. Building these new-age power plants will ultimately be a huge global business, and the bill will likely help California win more than its share of the jobs and economic growth.

Arnold Schwarzenegger, the former Republican governor who signed one of California's most important climate bills, made this point the other day on Twitter.

"We are Californians," he wrote. "We don't wait. We build the future economy here."

Recall that Jerry Brown has been the governor twice. He started pushing for clean energy during his first term back in the 1970s, when most people thought his starry-eyed talk about solar and wind power was crazy. Those and other exploits earned him the sobriquet "Governor Moonbeam."

Now we know he was not a moonstruck hippie; he was a visionary.

Today, solar panels and wind farms supply 8 percent of America's electricity and nearly 20 percent of California's. They are growing rapidly, and the costs have plummeted.

The state simply would not be in a position to make a 100 percent commitment if Governor Brown had not risked scorn to start California down this path so many decades ago, when Mr. de León was still in elementary school.

I write these words with admiration for Senator de León's work — and with even deeper admiration for everything the governor has accomplished for California. He is not just a brilliant political tactician; he is a former seminary student who wrestles with the moral questions embedded in our messy politics.

This is a time, Governor, to look past the messiness and the rivalries. I hope your ethical compass will tell you there is only one thing to do.

PHOTO: Gov. Jerry Brown (PHOTOGRAPH BY Alex Wong/Getty Images FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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